

For what sin did God destroy Sodom and Gomorrah?

Christine Roy Yoder
Columbia Theological Seminary

Christine Roy Yoder serves as Associate Professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary, Decatur, GA. She is a minister member of Greater Atlanta Presbytery, in which she has served on the Committee on Ministry. She is also the Associate Editor of the Bible Content Exam, Presbyteries' Cooperative Committee.

From the book

Frequently Asked Questions About Sexuality, The Bible, and The Church: Plain Talk about Tough Issues

A collection of essays considering the appropriate participation of gay and lesbian Presbyterians in church life and leadership.

The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah is the first text that many people think about when we talk about homosexuality and the Bible. This is striking because the narrative is not, in fact, about homosexuality, and certainly not about private, consensual acts of same-sex love. Rather, Genesis 19 illustrates the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah as sexual violence against men and women, as brutality against persons the community ought to protect. Such behavior reveals a society that no longer observes “the way of the LORD” – namely, righteousness and justice (Gen 18:19) – and thus receives God’s judgment.

Genesis 18 sets the stage. The chapter opens with a depiction of Abraham as gracious host to three angelic messengers. Abraham runs to meet them, offers them shelter and the best food he has available, stands alongside them as they eat (18:1-8), and accompanies two of them on their way (18:16). His behavior exemplifies hospitality, an eagerness to serve others, even, and here particularly, unexpected strangers. That hospitality continues when God, who lingers after the meal, reports there is a great outcry against Sodom and Gomorrah and invites Abraham to help adjudicate the gravity of the sin (18:16-21). Without missing a beat, Abraham intercedes for the sake of the righteous (18:22-33). His questions of God are direct and relentless: “Will you indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked?” “Will not the judge of all the earth do justice?” Seven times he refers to the righteous. Twice he cautions God “far be it from you to do such a thing!” He is so persistent that God ends their exchange and departs, leaving Abraham standing there. We readers stand with him, wondering as we turn to Genesis 19 what grave sin we will find at Sodom and Gomorrah and whether there are enough righteous to save the cities. Will there be ten? Will God find even one?

The description of Abraham's hospitality in Genesis 18 heightens the inhospitality and injustice we discover at Sodom and Gomorrah. When the two angelic messengers arrive in Sodom, they meet Abraham's nephew Lot. Lot initially welcomes them with hospitality like Abraham's, but his graciousness falters and ultimately fails amid the shouts of a gathering crowd. "The men of Sodom, young and old, all the people to the last man" (19:4) surround Lot's house and demand he bring out his guests "so that we may know them" (19:5). The Hebrew verb "to know" may refer to sex (e.g., Gen 4:1, 17, 25; 1 Kgs 1:4), and Lot indicates that he understands their demand as such when, much to our horror, he offers instead his daughters who have not yet "known" a man (19:8). The scene is replete with threat and chaos: Lot with his back to the door and pleading with the crowd ("I beg you, my brothers, do not do this evil," 19:7), his guests cornered inside, the crowd's increasing stridency, the men pushing and shoving against Lot in an attempt to break down the door, the messengers' last minute rescue of Lot. With each verse, the volatility of the crowd intensifies. No consent is asked for. No consent is given. This is not a matter of private, consensual homosexual sex. The mob's demand – their intended evil – is gang rape.

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The mob's demand for homosexual gang rape is paralleled by Lot's disturbing counterproposal: the heterosexual gang rape of his two virgin, betrothed daughters (19:8). In his efforts to protect the male guests inside his house, he suggests he bring the women of his house outside – where they will be without physical protection and arguably, because he offers them to the men to rape, without legal recourse (Deut 22:22-27; cf. Judg 19-20). Telling the mob to "do

to them as you please," Lot exemplifies the very depravity about which he has just admonished the Sodomites. He offers his daughters as sexual objects (ironically a fate soon to be his own, cf. 19:30-38). If we hoped that Lot might be the one righteous person (so 2 Pet 2:5-8) who would motivate God to spare Sodom and Gomorrah, we now know there is no hope. The society is utterly corrupt. Indeed, God spares Lot and his family because God remembers Abraham (19:29).

Whereas Genesis 19 depicts the sin of Sodom and Gomorrah as sexual violence, other biblical texts that refer to the cities charge them with inhospitality and injustice generally. Notably, not one mentions the homosexual aspect of the mob's demand. (The obscure reference to "strange flesh" in Jude 7 suggests the sin is men violating angels.) Isaiah, for example, likens Judah to Sodom because they practice injustice ("crushing [God's] people...grinding the face of the poor") and,

in their arrogance, do not even try to hide it (3:1-15). Ezekiel similarly identifies Sodom's sin as arrogant disregard of those in need: "[Sodom] and her daughters had pride, excess of food, and prosperous ease, but did not aid the poor and needy" (16:49). Jeremiah warns that prophets have become like Sodom and Gomorrah because "they commit adultery, walk in lies, and strengthen the hands of evildoers so that no one turns from wickedness" (23:14). Matthew names the sin of Sodom as inhospitality (10:5-15; cf. Luke 10:1-12) and attributes its destruction to unrepentant disobedience of God (11:23-24). This larger tradition with regard to Sodom and Gomorrah suggests that Genesis 19 points to just one example (i.e. gang rape) of how egregiously the community was out of step with the "way of the LORD". That such inhospitality and injustices persist in our own communities should give us pause if we ever locate ourselves alongside Abraham early in the morning, looking down at the smoldering landscape that was Sodom and Gomorrah, thinking God's justice has been rightly served against "them" (19:27-29).